

# The Devil's mark and the witch-prickers of Scotland

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Search for the Devil's or witch's marks formed an important part of the examination of suspected witches in the 17th century. These skin marks were insensitive to piercing by a needle and did not bleed. Ideas about them varied between countries. In England and America, the mark was regarded as an extra nipple where the witch's familiar suckled<sup>1</sup>, similar to the concept that vampires gain control of their victims' souls by sucking their blood. In Scotland, the mark signified a covenant between the witch and the Devil. Bell<sup>2</sup> wrote, 'Tis but rational to think that the devil, aping God, should imprint a sacrament of his covenant . . .'. The beliefs of Scottish legal authorities were influenced by *Disquisitionum Magicarum* by Martin del Rio, a Jesuit priest<sup>3</sup>.

New witches were believed to be given the marks by the Devil either individually or at a sabbat.

The Devil, at his first meeting with Janet Barker,

desyret hir to be his servand, and that schoe sould be als trymelie cled as the best servand in Edinburgh, and that he wald geve hir ane reid wyliecoitt [waistcoat] or reid kirtle [gown], and that thairupoun scho condiscendit to be his servand for half ane yeir gif he wald keip promise, and that scho refusit the reid kirtle and was content to tak ane quhyte plaiding coit or quhyte wyliecoit. . . . the devill gave hir no new name quhan schoe aggregit to be his servand, bot that he gave hir his mark upone the bak neir to hir left schoulder . . .<sup>4</sup>.

Marie Lamont at Innerkip in 1662 confessed that

two yeares and ane half since, the devill came to the said Kattrein Scott's house, in the midst of the night, wher wer present with them, Margret McKenzie in Greinok, Janet Scot in Gorrok, herself, and several others; the devill was in the likeness of a meikle black man, and sung to them, and they dancit; he gave then wyn to drink, and wheat bread to eat, and they warr all vry mirrie . . . the devill bad her betak herself to his service . . . and bad her forsak her baptizme, which shee did, delyvering herself wholly to him, by putting her one hand on the crown of her head, and the other hand to the sole of her fott, and giving all betwixt these two into him. She confessed, that at that tyme he gave her name, and called her Clowts, and bad her call him Serpent, when she desired to speak with him. Shee confessed, that at that sam tym the devill nipit her upon the right syd, qlk was very painful for a tym, but yairefter he strakit it with his hand, and healed it; this she confesses to be his mark<sup>5</sup>.

## WHAT WERE THE FEATURES OF THE DEVIL'S MARK?

Devil's marks are described by several educated Scotsmen of the period—Reverend John Bell, minister of Gladsmuir; Reverend Robert Kirk, minister of Aberfoyle; and two eminent lawyers, Sir John Lauder of Fountainhall and Sir George Mackenzie.

*Bell*: The witch mark is sometimes like a blew spot, or a little tate, or reid spots, like flea biting; sometimes also the flesh is sunk in, and hallow, and this is put in secret places, as among the hair of the head, or eyebrows, within the lips, under the arm-pits, and even in the most secret parts of the body<sup>6</sup> . . . I myself have seen it in the body of a confessing witch, like a little powder-mark, of a blea colour, somewhat hard, and withall insensible, so as it did not bleed when I pricked it<sup>2</sup>.

*Kirk*: A spot that I have seen, as a small mole, horny, and brown-coloured; throw which mark, when a large brass pin was thrust, (both in buttock, nose and rooff of mouth,) till it bowed and became crooked, the witches, both men and women, nather felt a pain nor did bleed, nor knew the precise time when this was doing to them, (their eyes only being covered.)<sup>7</sup>.

*Fountainhall*: I did see the man's bodie search't, and prick't in two sundrie places, on at the ribs and the other at his shoulder; he seemed to find pain, but no blood followed, though the pins were the length of one's finger, and on of them was thrust in to the head; the marks were blewish, very small, and had no protruberancy above the skin. The pricker said there were three sorts of witches' marks; the horn mark, it was very hard; the brieff mark, it was very little; and the feeling mark, in which they had sence and pain<sup>8</sup>.

*Mackenzie*: The Devils mark useth to be a great Article with us, but it is not per se found relevant, except it be confest by them, that they got that mark with their own consent, *quo casu*, it is equivalent to a Paction. The mark is given them, as is alleadg'd, by a nip in any part of the body, and it is blew; Delrio calls it *Stigma*, or Character, and alleadges that it is sometimes like the impression of a Hares foot, or the foot of a Rat, or Spider<sup>9</sup>.

## WHAT WERE THE DEVIL'S MARKS IN REALITY?

### Naevi

A definite diagnosis is impossible. Many were almost certainly naevi or other excrescences. Kirk<sup>7</sup> says they were like moles. In contemporary descriptions the colour varies through brown, red and blue<sup>2,6-9</sup>. Some were hard or horny<sup>2,7,8</sup>, some flush with the skin surface<sup>8</sup>, others depressed<sup>6</sup>. Clearly, several skin lesions could fit these descriptions.

## Supernumerary nipples

Those Devil's marks which resembled a teat may have been supernumerary nipples. These may occur in either sex above or below the main nipples on a line from the groin to the axilla (Figure 1). Bruce<sup>10</sup> reports supernumerary nipples in 61 of 3956 individuals (1.54%). 9 had two accessory nipples; these lay on the front of the trunk below and medial to the ordinary nipples.

## Tattoos

Murray<sup>11</sup> claimed that the marks were tattoos given at the ceremonies of an organized pagan religion. She considered that deity was invested in an individual coven member, the Devil of the confessions.

The practice of tattooing is ancient<sup>12</sup>. It was carried out in many parts of the world and has been associated with rites of puberty, marriage and fertility. *Leviticus*, xix, 28 says 'Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor paint any marks on you'. Little is known about tattooing in Western Europe until the 18th century, but its popularity with early Christians in Britain was such that a Council in Northumberland in 787 AD prohibited it in certain religious orders.

Murray's argument is based on a number of sources from Scotland, England, France and Belgium which describe the giving of the Devil's mark. Marie Lamont's confession,

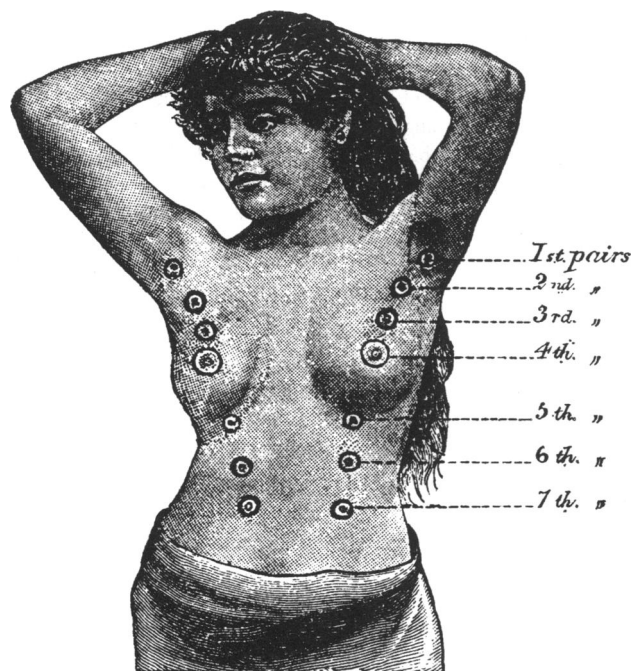


Figure 1 Sites of supernumerary nipples.

From Williams WR. Polymastism, with special reference to mammae erratae and the development of neoplasms from supernumerary mammary structures. *J Anat Physiol* 1891; 25: 223-55 (by kind permission of Cambridge University Press).

quoted above, and the following are among her Scottish examples<sup>11</sup>:

Two witches tried at Aberdeen in 1597 confessed to the Devil's marks, Andro Man that 'Christsonday [the name of his coven's god] bit a mark in the third finger of thy right hand', and Christian Mitchell that 'the Devil gave thee a nip on the back of thy right hand, for a mark that thou was one of his number'.

In Bute in 1662, Margaret McWilliam ... was marked in three places, one near her left shinbone, another between her shoulders, and the third on the hip, all of them blue marks.

Margaret McLevine ... stated that the Devil came to her, 'he took her by the middle finger of the right hand which he had almost cut off her, and therewith left her. Her finger was so sorely pained for the space of a month thereafter that there was no pain comparable to it, as also took her by the right leg which was sorely pained likewise as also by the Devil.'

Examination of the original sources of some of these statements shows that the confessions cannot be taken at face value. Nothing suggests tales of being marked by the Devil to be less fanciful than the other events related. For example, Andro Man may have been hallucinating:

Upon Rood-day in harvest, in this present year ... thou saw Christsonday come out of the snaw in likeness of a staig [young male horse], and the Queen of Elfen was there, and others with her, riding upon white hackneys. The elves had shapes and claites like men, and will have fair covered tables, and they are but shadows, but are starker [stronger] nor men, and they have been playing and dancing when they please; the queen is very pleasand, and will be auld and young when she pleases ...<sup>13</sup>.

The other confessions also soon move from the plausible to the fantastic.

Marie Lamont<sup>5</sup>: She ... confessed that shee, Kettie Scot, and Margrat Holm, cam to Allan Orr's house in the likeness of kats, and followed his wif into the chalmers, where they took a herring owt of a barrel, and having taken a byt off it, they left it behind them; the qlk herring the said Allan his wif did eat, and yairefter taking heavy disease, died.

Margaret McWilliam<sup>14</sup>: ... about Candlemes about 12 hours of the day she went owt to a fald beneath her hous called Faldtombuie and out of a furz in the mids of the fald ther apearred a spreit in the lyknes of a litle browne dog and desyred her to goe with it which she refused at first, it followed her downe to the fitt of the fald and apearred in the lyknes of a wele favored yong man and desyred her agane to goe with it and she should want nothing and that tyme griped her about the left hench quhich pained her sorely and went away as if it were a grene smoak.

Margaret McLevine<sup>14</sup>: ... he [the Devil] employed hir in a peice of service about three yeirs since quhen Robert Clarks boat was going to Irland quhair in was John McFerson and William Gillespie and ... the devill haveing a desing to destroy them and the boat did cary hir under his auxter unto the bake of Inchmernoach [a small island off Bute] ... to the end that she might droun the said boat by putting in hir hand betwene two boards of the boat and by pulling the mast out

of the root and flinging it over, but the same was prevented by God who turned the boat upon another course, yet albeit the same did no harme there was a storme raised quhich followed the said boat a space.

### SUSCEPTIBLE PERSONS FOR WITCHES

Many of these confessions were obtained under duress, following leading questions by lawyers and clergymen. There is no evidence for an organized witch-cult in Scotland in the 1600s<sup>15</sup> or that the Devil's marks were tattoos. There are no records of sabbats being disturbed and men such as Bell, Kirk, Fountainhall and Mackenzie would surely have known and written about them.

Mackenzie<sup>9</sup> probably had the true explanation:

Those poor persons who are ordinarily accused of this Crime, are poor ignorant creatures, and oft-times Women who understand not the nature of what they are accused of; . . . And it is dangerous that these who are of all others the most simple, should be tried for a Crime, which of all others is most mysterious.

These poor creatures when they are defamed, become so confounded with fear, and the close Prison in which they are kept, and so starved for want of meat and sleep, (either of which wants is enough to disorder the strongest reason) that hardly wiser or more serious people then they would escape distraction . . .

I went when I was a Justice-Depute to examine some Women, who had confest judicially, and one of them, who was a silly creature, told me under secesie, that she had not confest because she was guilty, but being a poor creature, who wrought for her meat, and being defam'd for a Witch she knew she would starve, for no person thereafter would either give her meat or lodging, and that all men would beat her, and hound Dogs at her, and that therefore she desired to be out of the World; whereupon she wept most bitterly, and upon her knees call'd God to witness what she said. Another told me that she was afraid the Devil would challenge a right to her, after she was said to be his servant, and would haunt her, as the Minister said when he was desiring her to confess; and therefore she desired to die.

### WERE THE WITCH-PRICKERS CHARLATANS?

In Scotland in the 1600s, witches were sometimes pricked by clergymen. Reverend John Aird and John Bell are known examples<sup>5</sup>. Most, however, were examined by professional 'prickers'. The names of several of these men are known—James Scobie (Musselburgh, Edinburgh)<sup>4</sup>, John Balfour (Corshouse)<sup>3</sup>, George Cathie (Lanark)<sup>3</sup>, Alexander Bogs (Ayrshire)<sup>3</sup>, John Dick (Tain)<sup>3</sup>, John Kincaid (Tranent, Dalkeith, Dirleton, Forfar, Kinross)<sup>3,16,17</sup>, John Bain<sup>18</sup>, David Cowan (Tranent)<sup>3,13,17</sup>, James Paterson (Inverness, Elgin, Forres, Wardlaw)<sup>3,19</sup>, Thomas Crauffourd (Dumfries)<sup>20</sup>. Some travelled widely; the places in brackets are those where they are known to have lived or operated. Their pay was good<sup>20,21</sup>. James Paterson was able to employ two servants<sup>19</sup>.

The prickers were rogues. In 1632, the Privy Council reprimanded John Balfour<sup>13</sup>, '... he goes athort the country abusing simple and ignorant people for his private gain and commoditie'. John Kincaid, the most famous, was called to test witches in Forfar and was rewarded with the freedom of the burgh<sup>3</sup>. In 1662, however, he was imprisoned in Kinross for pricking suspected witches without permission. He was released on account of his age, on condition that he stopped pricking<sup>3,17</sup>. James Paterson had many women falsely condemned. Later he was found to be a woman in disguise<sup>3,19</sup>. John Dick and David Cowan were both prosecuted for their cruelty. The former, operating in the Highlands on his own initiative, had severely tortured a John Hay<sup>3</sup>. The latter had pricked a Catherine Liddell in Tranent in 1678 'to the great effusion of her blood, and whereby her skin is raised and her body highly swelled, and she is in danger of her life'. The woman, however, proved her innocence and sued Cowan, a former pupil of Kincaid, for assault and defamation of character. Cowan was imprisoned at the pleasure of the Privy Council. Fountainhall says, '... he was a cheat and abused the people for gain'<sup>3,13,17</sup>.

Mackenzie<sup>9</sup> describes the work of the pricker:

This mark is discovered amongst us by a Pricker, whose Trade it is, and who learns it as other Trades; but this is a horrid cheat . . . there are many pieces of dead flesh which are insensible, even in living bodies: And a Villain who used this Trade with us, being in the year 1666 apprehended for other villanies, did confess all this Trade to be a meer cheat.

Fountainhall also had reservations<sup>8</sup>, 'I find no judicious lawyer laying anie weight upon this marke . . .'. He goes on to say that the prickers are

of the meanest rank, and are either seduced by malice, poverty, ignorance, or covetousness; and it's the unspeakable mercy and providence of our good God, that that poor devill has not the command of money, . . . else he would debauch the greatest part of the world.

Gardiner<sup>22</sup> tells that around 1650, a Scottish pricker commissioned by the magistrates of Newcastle condemned 27 out of 30 witches.

The said reputed witch-finder acquainted lieut. colonel Hobson, that he knew women, whether they were witches or no, by their looks, and when the said person was serching of a personable, and good-like woman, the said colonel replied, . . . surely this woman is none, and need not be tried, but the scotch-man said she was . . .; and presently in sight of all the people, laid her body naked to the waste, with her cloaths over her head, . . . and then he ran a pin into her thigh, and then suddenly let her coats fall, and then demanded whether she had nothing of his in her body, but did not bleed, but she being amazed, replied little, then he put his hand up her coats, and pulled out the pin, and set her aside as a guilty person, and child

of the devil, and fell to try others whom he made guilty. Lieutenant colonel Hobson . . . caused that woman to be brought again, and her cloaths pulled up to her thigh, and required the scot to run the pin into the same place, and then it gushed out of blood, and the said scot cleared her, and said, she was not a child of the devil. The said witch-finder was laid hold on in Scotland, . . . and condemned for such like villanie, exercised in Scotland; and upon the gallows, he confessed he had been the death of above two hundred and twenty women in England, and Scotland, for the gain of twenty shillings a peece, and beseeched forgiveness, and was executed.

Close reading of this account suggests that Lieutenant Colonel Hobson realized that the pricker had pretended to prick the young woman. She may have felt nothing because the needle was not in her thigh. Her skirt was blocking the view and masking the deception. Even in the middle of the witch-hunt era, this pricker's identification of Devil's marks was seen to be a fraud.

Sir Walter Scott in his *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft*<sup>23</sup> writes, ' . . . there is room also to believe that the professed prickers used a pin, the point, or lower part of which was, on being pressed down, sheathed in the upper, which was hollow for the purpose, and that which appeared to enter the body did not pierce it at all.' Such needles are described by Robbins<sup>24</sup> (Figure 2). It is unlikely that all, or even many, of the insensitive marks can be explained in this way. Fountainhall, a learned judge, had seen marks pricked<sup>8</sup>.

A *Relation of the Diabolical Practices of the Witches of the Sheriffdom of Renfrew in the Kingdom of Scotland* shows that the medical profession as well as lawyers were convinced<sup>25</sup>. Matthew Brisbane, mentioned in the account, was the physician to the City of Glasgow and a Rector of the University.

. . . a Needle of 3 Inches length was frequently put in without their Knowledge, nor would any blood come from these places, and tho many, especially Doctors, ridicul'd these as Storys, yet after we cal'd Dr Bisbin and Baird, and let them see a Needle of a great length put into the top of one of the Vertebrae of the Back, and one into Margaret Lang, a hand breadth beneath her Ribbs in the Region of

the Lower Belly, they both thought it wonderful, being in a place where, in another Woman, the Needle could not but peirce the Guts: . . . when there was any difficulty to find the mark they did quite uncloath them, but then it was in a Room, and not publickly, before one or two of the Justices, a Minister; one of the Advocats and the Clark . . .

## WHY WERE THE MARKS INSENSITIVE?

Psychiatrists have claimed that hysteria would explain the sites of anaesthesia. It seems unlikely that the victims were all hysterics. Fear usually heightens pain perception<sup>26</sup>. The explanations given by Spanos<sup>27</sup> seem close to the truth:

Some witch suspects undoubtedly suffered from a variety of organic disorders that produced areas of cutaneous insensitivity. They were, after all, typically old, chronically undernourished, and exposed both to the diseases that stem from primitive and unsanitary living conditions and to the accidents that regularly befall people who spend a long life engaged in hard physical labor. For instance, many suspects must have suffered from disorders of peripheral circulation, arthritic problems, strokes, and other diseases of old age that are associated with varying degrees of cutaneous insensitivity. Some probably suffered from vitamin B deficiencies and syphilis, diseases . . . that are sometimes associated with cutaneous insensitivity. Related to the notion of insensitivity due to disease is the fact that witch prickers often looked for tissues that are insensitive to pain. For instance, they regularly probed warts and old scars, both of which are insensitive.

Finally, some subjects may have voluntarily suppressed any display of pain in order to get the search over with. . . . Many suspects must have come to the conclusion that the procedure would continue until the prickers found what they were looking for. Being repeatedly stabbed to the bone with a long needle could be embarrassing as well as painful . . . some suspects might have suppressed a flinch to a needle prick in their arm in order to avoid having their anus or vagina probed . . . or to simply put an end to a painful and seemingly endless search.

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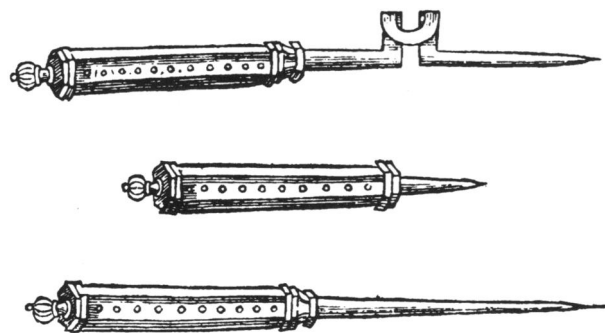


Figure 2 True and false bodkins.

The one in the centre had a retractable needle. From Robbins RH. *The Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*. London: Spring Books, 1959 (by kind permission of Pantheon Books, New York).

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